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DE RUEHDBU #0002/01 0021149  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
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FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0061  
INFO RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK 0003  
RUEHAH/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT 0003  
RUEHTA/AMEMBASSY ASTANA 0003  
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT 0003  
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW 0003  
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 0009

UNCLAS DUSHANBE 000002

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

STATE FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EAID](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER REQUESTS HELP TO REBUILD TAJIK  
NATIONAL MEDICAL UNIVERSITY

11. (SBU) Summary: Tajik Deputy Foreign Minister Kasimov summoned donor country representatives December 27 to request assistance for rebuilding the National Medical University, which had burnt to the ground the day before. Kasimov stated that primary responsibility for the emergency response rests with the Tajik government, and acknowledged that spending on lavish presidential show projects has contributed to growing donor fatigue. Kasimov also discussed progress on operations at the U.S.-built Tajik-Afghan bridge and offered advice on conducting future exchanges with the Tajik Parliament. End summary.

#### National Medical University - Tajiks Request Help

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12. (SBU) Electric heaters, ancient wiring, and an alarmingly poor response from firefighters contributed to the total destruction of the main building of the Tajik Medical University on December 26. One of the oldest government buildings in this relatively young capital, the Tajik Medical University graced the city's main tree-lined boulevard and was situated close to the Chinese Embassy and the governmental dacha complex, and only a few hundred meters from the main fire department. The interior of the building was totally destroyed. However, authorities were able to save only the contents of the university's library and archives. There were no casualties. Multiple witnesses reported that the fire brigade was extremely slow to respond and when it finally arrived on site had no ability to pump water onto the burning building. One rumor was that the hydrants near the campus had all been paved over during one of the road renovations in front of the governmental dacha compound. Firefighters remained at the scene overnight watching the fire consume the building.

13. (SBU) With smoke still rising from the ashes, the government took quick steps to organize a response to the fire. A press release the following morning announced the opening of a bank account to accept contributions toward rebuilding the university campus, and President Rahmon instructed the ministries of health and foreign affairs to reach out to donor missions. Contacts in academic institutions have reported that "voluntary contributions" will be taken from their paychecks to help fund the recovery.

14. (U) Deputy Foreign Minister Kasimov summoned the deputy chief of mission and USAID country director on December 27 to ask what U.S. assistance might be forthcoming. He met separately with representatives of other donor countries and multilateral institutions. Kasimov had few details about the number of students and staff displaced by the fire and noted he was more concerned about the impact on Tajikistan's health sector than about the actual

physical building. By December 28, post had received the Health Ministry's more detailed list of needs. Post offered to assess the needs and determine whether U.S. assistance could usefully contribute to the emergency response.

15. (SBU) In order to manage expectations, we informed Kasimov that a cash contribution to the government's emergency account, or U.S. financing of a reconstruction project would not be possible. However, we would look into whether our ongoing programs might be configured to help minimize the impact on the country's health sector. Kasimov agreed the government itself would have to take on Qsector. Kasimov agreed the government itself would have to take on the main task of rebuilding, but said any donor help would speed the recovery. We informed Kasimov rather bluntly that donors were growing weary of the government passing the hat for contributions for "priority" projects while President Rahmon continues to waste funding on ostentatious show projects such as the new gold-domed presidential palace. When the medical university was first built in the late 1930s, it was one of the very first government buildings, along with the Pedagogical University, to be constructed in the capital (then Stalinabad) -- demonstrating that health and education were government priorities. Those should still be top priorities for the Tajik government, just as they are for our U.S. assistance programs.

16. (SBU) Comment: Kasimov took note of our points on donor fatigue, although he is unlikely to pass along our suggestion to divert funding from the presidential palace in order to rebuild the medical campus. The mandatory contributions from the already poorly paid university faculty and staff could cause some public discontent, although past government decrees -- e.g., dictating dress codes for students -- tended to receive unanimous support (at least publicly) from university staff. End comment.

#### Dealing with Parliament on Exchanges

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17. (SBU) We also used the meeting with Deputy Foreign Minister Kasimov to inform him about problems encountered during the recent Open World exchange program involving a group of four Tajik parliamentarians. The Tajik members of parliament skipped scheduled events, pressured the organizers to allow more time for shopping and sight-seeing, and were caught consuming large quantities of alcohol on the flight over and at a fast food restaurant in Utah. Kasimov said that he had not received a report on this exchange from Tajik Ambassador Shirinov in Washington and advised the Embassy to meet with the Speaker of Parliament to discuss these issues. He agreed that exchange programs should not be used as rewards or boondoggles for Tajik officials.

#### Tajik-Afghan Bridge

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18. (U) Kasimov raised the issue of the Tajik-Afghan bridge, noting that commercial operations have been expanding since the initial vehicles were allowed across the bridge in November. He reminded us that security issues remain a chief concern on the Tajik side. (Note: Kasimov played a critical role in convincing the State Committee on National Security, which oversees the Tajik Border Guards, to acquiesce to the initial commercial operations on the bridge.) We provided a status report on continued construction activities at the bridge site and plans for equipping and training the border guards and customs officials posted at Nizhniy Pyanj.

JACOBSON